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ABSTRACT

In 1921, during the course of a news conference, President Warren G. Harding misinterpreted the provisions of one of the treaties then under consideration by delegates to the Washington Disarmament Conference. His error was corrected in a few hours, but this incident was blown out of proportion by those who were convinced that Harding was an inept president. It was said that this misstatement led directly to the use thereafter of written questions in presidential news conferences and that Harding was ordered (by Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes) to stop taking oral questions from reporters. This version is still finding its way into journalism and mass communications texts and illustrates the difficulty of ascertaining historical truth in the face of conflicting evidence. In fact, Harding had started requiring written questions three weeks earlier, not due to any ineptness on his part, but because so many correspondents were accredited to the Conference and this was the only means of adequately dealing with them. The Conference incident was the first major stumbling block in Harding's up-to-then good relations with the press. He quickly recovered and continued to take both written and oral questions from reporters--at times he even allowed himself to be quoted directly. (Author)

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PRESIDENT HARDING AND THE WASHINGTON DISARMAMENT CONFERENCE--

A QUESTION OF HISTORICAL VERISIMILITUDE

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INTRODUCTION: A QUESTION OF ACCURACY

An ongoing debate among historians of all disciplines seems to be the definition of what is historical truth--the question of whether the facts surrounding an event match the suppositions and evidence which go together to make up what we regard as accepted beliefs. For instance, historiographers Jaques Barzun and Henry F. Graff observed that "historical truth is always complex and always difficult to ascertain."[1] Louis Gottschalk defined the historical credibility of an event as "not that it is actually what happened, but that it is as close to what actually happened as we can learn from a critical examination of the best available sources."[2] According to Gottschalk, it is the duty of every historian to establish "verisimilitude (the appearance of truth) rather than objective truth," for "though there is a high correlation between the two, they are not necessarily identical."[3]

Such a case of verisimilitude seems to surround an incident in journalism history which occurred in 1921 involving President Warren G. Harding and the press corps covering the Washington Disarmament Conference. The Washington Conference proved to be the first major stumbling block in President Harding's up-to-then good relations with the press, for during a news conference, Harding misinterpreted the provisions of the four-power treaty between the United States, Great Britain, France and Japan. He said the treaty did not apply to the home islands of Japan.[4] His wrong answer set off a series of diplomatic shock waves which did not cease until later that evening

when the White House issued a correction.

It can be argued that this incident was blown well out of proportion, especially after the Japanese government shifted its position a week later and took the view that Harding expressed.[5] But it was from here that the myth of the bumbling, ignorant Warren G. Harding was spawned--a portrayal that has still not been abandoned.

Stanford University professor William L. Rivers, in a just-released book he has co-authored,[6] uses the incident to repeat an earlier claim he made of the President: "Harding did not always know what he was talking about." He said the misstatement caused Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes ("his chin whiskers bristling") to rush to the White House to get an official correction. Afterward, Rivers says, Hughes "prevailed upon Harding to agree that only written questions submitted well in advance of press conferences would be answered."[7] Rivers made similar assertions in two earlier books[8] terming Harding "almost totally inept," declaring that the President "blundered disasterously" with his wrong answer, and that as a result, the Secretary of State "pressured him into requiring that all questions be submitted in advance, in writing."[9]

The purpose of this paper is not to criticize Rivers' scholarship, for there was certainly much written by earlier authors upon which to base such an assertion. Some writers embroidered the incident even further--various accounts had Hughes offering his resignation, while others had the Secretary

of State sternly lecturing the President and ordering that he stop taking oral questions from reporters. Actually, sources indicate that written questions were being required of reporters at least three weeks before because of the large number of correspondents attending the conference, not due to any ineptitude on the President's part.

This paper seeks another answer to what really happened with an examination of events leading up to the Washington Disarmament Conference, and the newspaper coverage given to the President's misstatement at the time it occurred.

FOREIGN POLICY SUCCESSES

The year 1921 signalled several successes in foreign affairs for the newly-elected Harding administration. Six weeks after he took office, the Senate approved--at Harding's urging--a treaty with Columbia designed to heal the bitter feelings created in 1903 when the United States encouraged Panama's independence. Columbia was awarded $25 million for the loss of the province.

In a special message to Congress in April, Harding had urged an end to the technical state of war which still existed with the European Central Powers after the Senate refused to ratify President Woodrow Wilson's Treaty of Versailles. Both houses of Congress passed resolutions declaring the Great War over, and Harding signed the joint resolution July 2, 1921, officially ending the war.[10]

But it was in the realm of disarmament that Harding was to have the most success. Following the end of the World War, there was much sentiment to curtail the expensive arms and naval race going on among the United States, Britain, and Japan. The leading Senate critic of the upward spiral in armaments was Republican William E. Borah of Idaho, who introduced a resolution to have the President call a conference on disarmament among the three nations.

Harding went further than Borah wanted, as he not only invited Great Britain and Japan to sit in on such a conference, but included France and Italy as well, and then added Far East questions to the agenda. China, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Portugal were invited to attend these latter sessions because of their interest in the area. The Washington Conference on the Limitation of Armaments was slated to begin November 12.[11]

The planned conference became front-page news on July 11 when it was announced by Secretary of State Hughes, but it also served to increase speculation as to Harding's motives. In the past, the new President had advocated an "association of nations" instead of the newly-created League of Nations. To some newspapers, calling a separate conference in Washington seemed to be a further effort to discredit the Wilsonian League and assert American independence of Europe in foreign affairs.

Since Harding himself was a newspaper publisher, it is not surprising that the needs of press correspondents were taken into consideration during the planning for the upcoming conference. Several months before it was due to open, the State Department

asked a special committee of Washington correspondents to draft recommendations for the accommodation of the large number of correspondents who would be coming to Washington to report the proceedings. As a result, foreign newsmen were given the same privileges as those accorded American newsmen, and many of the two hundred overseas journalists began attending President Harding's news conferences while the disarmament sessions were in progress.

As a contrast to the secret peace treaty deliberations at Versailles, the plenary sessions were open to the public and the decisions made during the working sessions (where only the delegates attended) were announced at that time. The press was given free access to the delegates, most of whom regularly scheduled briefings and permitted themselves to be questioned on any subject.[12]

As journalist David Lawrence described the publicity workings of the conference:

> Communiques giving in the third person every speech made during the session for the fiscal day, and interviews en masse with one or more of the principal delegates of each country are the two channels through which newspaper correspondents receive the facts and opinions enumerated in the daily reports of the arms conference. A copy of the communique is given every correspondent accredited to the conference, and each also has free access to every interview given newspaper men by any delegate. As a result, every reporter is on an equal footing, the difference in the length or quality of write-ups by different men being a true index of their ability.[13]

Even President Harding went out of his way to make himself available to newsmen. According to the New York Times, the President "made spontaneous and definite statements, after which he gave out unprepared answers to various questions that were asked of him" by reporters. Since he was expressing himself in an

unofficial capacity, Harding "confined himself to expression of his views to the press as though to submit them to the test of publicity."[14] The President felt comfortable with reporters, and so when R. V. Oulahan, chief of the Washington bureau for the New York Times, was taken seriously ill while covering the conference, President and Mrs. Harding sent a large bouquet of White House chrysanthemums.[15]

In many respects, events surrounding the Washington Conference were media events. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was dedicated by the President in a moving ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery on Armistice Day, November 11. The next day, the disarmament conference opened.

That opening day, a Saturday, had been carefully planned by Hughes and Harding with newsmen in mind. The President kept his opening remarks short, then turned the stage over to Hughes who made his astonishing proposal for a "naval holiday" to halt the building of capital ships by the great powers, and for the scrapping of some of the major vessels afloat and under construction.

It was a surprising, far-reaching proposal which affected all the delegates. Pandemonium broke out, and when the excitement had died down, the American delegation moved for adjournment. The motion was quickly passed, the conference recessed, and the American disarmament proposal was front page news for the weekend.[16] The President and his advisers realized the importance of good news coverage, and it is important to note in this regard that Harding had been holding twice-weekly news conferences while in Washington

since his inauguration. He was used to meeting informally with journalists--a habit he began during the 1920 presidential campaign--and it was only with the onslaught of foreign journalists that the President felt it necessary to begin answering written questions.

The New York Times reported on November 30 that a question box had been set up for the President's semi-weekly press conferences at the White House. After that date, every correspondent would be required to submit his questions in writing before entering the President's office. The questions were to be given to Harding, and he would answer them as he saw fit.[17] The question box seemed a necessity because Harding was simply not able to cover all the ground that many of the correspondents desired. As the Times explained:

> Heretofore, the President has talked freely with correspondents; under the new arrangements he has thought of abandoning his practice of perfect frankness. When he did not wish to discuss a question put to him, he said so frankly. What has led him to try written questions has been the fact that at times conflicting interpretations have been placed on his refusal to answer.[18]

Out of this, a new set of guidelines developed. In future conferences, while the President was still not to be quoted either directly nor indirectly, when he once read a question and started discussion on it, it was to be regarded that permission was given for the answering of verbal questions bearing on the subject. In other words, Harding was agreeing to answer both written and oral questions at news conferences. It was a policy which would very soon get him into trouble.

DIFFERING INTERPRETATIONS

On the afternoon of Friday, December 20, reporters trooped in to question the President. As the New York Times related, "no little consternation was caused" by the announcement from the White House that the President, "in response to a written question," interpreted the terms of the Four-Power Treaty so as not to include the home islands of Japan. According to the Times:[19]

> It is difficult to exaggerate the impression caused by the White House announcement that came about one o'clock. It was at the regular bi-weekly conference with the newspaper men that the President, in response to a written question as to whether or not the treaty provisions applied to the main islands of Japan, made known that he did not take that view, holding that the provisions of the treaty no more than applied to the mainland of the United States.

The Times reported that "all other subjects of discussion of the conference immediately fell into the shade" as newsmen asked followup questions. The White House put out a correcting statement about 7:15 p.m. which appeared in the morning papers for the next day. President Harding took full responsibility for the error and did not attempt to blame either the correspondents or members of the State Department. The correction was phrased thusly in the New York Times:

> When the President was responding to press inquiries at the afternoon interview today, he expressed the opinion that the home land of Japan did not come within the words "insular possessions and insular dominions" under the Four-Party Agreement, except as a territorial property of any other nation which is a party to the agreement. This expression has been emphasized as a division between the President and the delegates to the conference in construing the Four-Party Agreement.
>
> The President announced tonight that the difference in view in no wise will be permitted to embarrass the conference or the ratification of agreement. He had assumed all along that the spirit of the conference contemplates a confidence which pledges respect of territory in every way which tends to promote lasting peace.

He has learned from the United States' delegation to the conference that they have agreed to the construction which includes the homeland of Japan in the term "insular possessions and insular dominions" and has no objection to that construction.

Newsmen, according to that same edition of the Times, apparently made efforts to learn from Secretary Hughes what had transpired between the President and the Secretary, but it was reported that Hughes, the chairman of the American delegation to the conference, "would not discuss what had come from the White House. The paper reported that in making the statement, the President acted without consultation of the State Department and without any definite purpose of announcing the attitude of the administration. The Times said that the President was "merely voicing a personal opinion and had no thought of precipitating a clash in conference circles."

The Four Power Treaty in question--contrary to much of the other work of the Disarmament Conference--was agreed to in private sessions by representatives of the United States, Britain, France, and Japan. It provided that the four would respect one another's rights in the Pacific and refer future disputes in the area to a joint conference. The new pact also terminated the pre-war Anglo-Japanese alliance.[20] The publication of the treaty December 13 caused a flurry of excitement in Congress and in the Hearst press, with differing groups attempting to interpret certain sections of the treaty in differing ways. Hence, the turmoil over Harding's misstatement a few days later.

At his next news conference on December 24, Harding told newsmen that he felt differing interpretations placed upon the terms of the Four-Power Treaty were "unimportant." In a departure

from usual ground rules, the President was quoted directly in explaining his views on the treaty:

> I have a feeling that mankind has become wise enough to sit down before the war and try to settle, and that is the object of the Four-Power Treaty. That is why I say the smaller lack of agreement in construing it is not significant.[21]

The President, to make his position clear, twice suspended the rule which barred quoting him directly or indirectly, and agreed to the use of the statements in quotation marks.

At Harding's news conference the following Friday, his dimly lit oval office room was crowded with newspapermen hoping he would amplify on his statement of the previous Tuesday. By this time, new rules were fully in effect for written questions, according to the New York Times:[22]

> The rule is to submit written questions to the President, these he reads and answers if he cares to comment on the particular one. Written questions had been left at the White House during the day for submission to him, in the hope of newspaper men that he would follow up his brief allusion of Tuesday with a further statement of the position of the Administration on the treaty.
>
> The President has caused mimeographed copies of his main statement to be prepared in advance and these copies were handed to the newspaper men. In reply to an inquiry, he said he had no objection to the statement being used as a quotation from himself.

The Times added that while Harding would not permit himself to be quoted directly on some of his answers to questions, he did grant permission for the use of the stenographic report of his reply to a question about whether he felt the world had made "great progress in the direction of peace and good will."

"I rather think," Harding said as he read the question--one of the many he held in his left hand--"this question was answered at the last interview--1921 is almost over." The President then

read the question slowly and gave his reply, which was taken down stenographically by Rudolph Forester, executive clerk at the White House since the Cleveland administration. When asked for permission to quote him directly on the answer, Harding was at first reported to be reluctant to depart from the unwritten rule, but when pressed, gave his approval. An official copy of his answer was made available later at the White House.

For the most part, the President's subsequent news conferences were again reported with the usual terms of "it can be stated on the highest authority that . . ." and similar phrases used to indicate the President was speaking, but not for quotation. This rule was broken briefly during Harding's final news conference of the year when he denied published stories of friction between himself and Secretary of State Hughes.

The Times of January 1, 1922, alluded to an unidentified published newspaper report that Hughes was somewhat irritated over Harding's misunderstanding of the terms of the Four-Power Treaty. Also, Hughes reportedly felt affronted because Harding had entertained publisher William Randolph Hearst for luncheon at the White House earlier in the week. Hearst had editorially attacked the work of the Washington Conference and Secretary Hughes. The President was asked at his news conference whether he cared to comment on the published statement that Hughes was "vexed" and expected to quit the cabinet.

"There is nothing in that," replied Harding. "That is silly."

Since quotation of the President was not permitted, a correspondent asked Harding whether reporters might quote his characterization

of the story as silly.

"The President said it was silly," Harding replied, as he approved the quotation. "Silly with capital letters." Newspapermen were then told that they should not walk away with the impression that there were difficulties in the relationship between Harding and Hughes.

"The truth of the matter is," the Times concluded, "they are joining one another in laughter over the matter."[23] While that might be overstating Hughes' reaction, it seems that he was not irked at Harding.

The President remained in the background throughout the Washington Conference, and except for the slip regarding the Japanese home islands, refused to allow reporters to drag him into commenting upon the work of the conference.[24] When the ended in early February, Harding drew the praise of Percy S. Bullen, spokesman for the Association of Foreign Press Correspondents. He wrote the President that:

> The correspondents of the foreign press attending the conference were as a body keenly solicitous to cooperate with you in securing the fulfillment of the great object which you had in view in convening the conference in Washington.[25]

Harding replied to Bullen with his usual amiable expressions of good will, then talked about the importance of newsmen at the Washington Conference:

> May I add that everybody in a place of official responsibility in connection with the recent conference in Washington feels that we are peculiarly under obligation to the representatives of the press who so effectively and sincerely cooperated to make the conference a success. I can not but feel that this cooperation on the part of the press was one of the potent elements in bringing about the results that have been so gratifying.[26]

In late April, 1922, President Harding sent a letter to a dinner hosted by the Hearst Services in honor of the publishers gathered in New York for various newspaper conventions. He expressed his regrets at not being able to attend, and he also praised the work of the newspapermen who covered the Washington Disarmament Conference:

> It would be a special pleasure to meet the representatives of American publishers who will be gathered and to congratulate them on reaching what I have considered, with the last year, the high water mark of American newspaper service. I refer to the intelligent and effective reporting of the proceedings of the Conference on Limitation of Armament. In that connection, I have felt the American press did a service to the world, and demonstrated its special claim to leadership among newspapers everywhere.27

SECOND THOUGHTS BEGIN

The flare-up over Harding's slip at the Disarmament Conference can be viewed as a watershed of sorts, for from that time on, the presidency appeared to cease to be enjoyable to Harding. Newspaperman David Lawrence described the President following a January, 1922, interview, as being in a "soliloquizing mood" about the tasks of the presidency. The journalist felt that "there was just a touch of pathos in the President's observations on his critics," as he wrote:

> . . . he was not a little hurt that the critics should spend their time worrying about impromptu remarks made by the President in conversation with reporters and later sent broadcast as the matured and deliberate utterances of a nation's chief executive. . . .
>
> Mr. Harding himself has found that looking at the presidency from inside the White House dwarfs in importance some of the criticisms which are made about a nation's executive, and that while he is the last person in the world to be sensitive about honest criticism, he wonders if the little

carping innuendoes are necessary for the successful working of a democracy.[28]

If Harding was cool to some of his critics in the press as to his style, it was clear by a dispatch written by Lawrence on March 4, 1922, that the majority of Washington correspondents felt that the President was doing a good job. The article, published a year after Harding took the oath of office, said that newspapermen felt Harding had "manifested a spirit of service--a desire to work conscientiously and honestly for what he believed was right. Lawrence went on to add of Harding, "His relations with the press have been excellent. He has concealed little and talked frankly upon public questions."[29]

President Harding returned to the National Press Club a year after his inauguration for a speech, and it was here that he revealed in public his disillusionment with the presidential office. Harding complained that he could not find the time to do all the things he wanted to do.

"I never find myself done," he said. "I never find myself with my work completed. I do not believe there is a human being who can do all the work there is to be done in the President's office.

"It seems," he told his listeners, "as though I have been President for twenty years."[30]

A BETTER MAN

Warren Harding would be dead less than two years after his press club appearance--he succumbed to a cerebral hemorhage while in San Francisco August 2, 1923. He would be dead before what would

become known as the Harding Administration scandals would be exposed--Teapot Dome, the Veterans Bureau, and the doings of the so-called Ohio Gang in the ttle House on K Street. The public would come to regard Harding as an inept man who presided over the most corrupt administration since that of Grant, one who appointed grafters to public office, one who was moraly insufficient, and one who was managed and ordered around by others.

Perhaps it is on this last point that the myth of Harding bowing to the written questions rule at press conferences following his faux pas at the Washington Conference began. If Harding was managed by others, what is more natural than to conclude that Secretary Hughes--himself a presidential candidate in 1916 who narrowly lost to Woodrow Wilson--should lay down the law to the President. Given the personalities of both men, it appears unlikely. More importantly, there is evidence that written questions were being required of journalists at least three weeks before the slip-up occurred.

In researching the Harding years as far as the press was concerned, the New York Times was found to be a valuable resource. Times reporters would meticulously account details of news conferences (the office was dimly lit; Harding held a sheaf of questions in his left hand), and there is no reason to feel the reporter who wrote the story was mistaken about the presidential question box.

And what of the nature of Harding? News accounts point out that even after the fluff over the Four-Power Treaty, the President continued to answer both written and oral questions. He was too used to being on an informal basis with newsmen to discontinue the

habit.

Revisionist historians have generally concluded that Harding was a more able man than he is given credit for being. He came into office on a slogan of "Back to Normalcy," and sincerely set about trying to bring order out of postwar chaos. One of those efforts was the Washington Disarmament Conference, and while later analysts would question the wisdom of some of the decisions which were made there, one cannot question Harding's sincerity.

And, given his belief in the importance of the press in informing the public and recognizing his role in the information process, it seems that he can be forgiven a slip of the tongue--which is really all that the incident was.

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[13]Harvard News, January 4, 1922. From a news clipping enclosed in correspondence from David Lawrence to author, March 2, 1972.

[14]New York Times, November 28, 1921.

[15]New York Times, November 26, 1921.

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[17]New York Times, November 30, 1921. Press historian F. B. Marbut also noted that the written questions rule was in effect before Harding's misinterpretation incident. See News from the Capital (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 173-74.

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